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Kamil V. Zvelebil

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# The construction of nature: *Ṛṣis* and *Kavis*<sup>1</sup>

BRUNO LO TURCO, Sapienza Università di Roma

**SUMMARY:** In spite of appearances, Veda and *kāvya* share some crucial features. Amongst these features one notes the importance of cosmopoietic function. In fact the Vedic seers are said to be “creators of beings”. Moreover, they are the base of royalty. Nevertheless, it is the Word that possesses the real cosmopoietic power: the seers possess this power only insofar as they manifest the Word, which creates and orders the natural world. The Word’s cosmopoietic power transfers ideally from the *ṛṣi* to the *kavi*. The figure of *kavi* was probably deliberately modelled on that of *ṛṣi*, so that it matched particular socio-political projects: the re-foundation of royal power, the elaboration of a model of universal domination, the universalization of a learned community.

In the *ṚS*, the *ṛṣis*, or Vedic seers, are characterized by two fundamental functions: one is that of inspiration and clairvoyance, two shamanic characteristics connected with *soma*; the other, closely related to the first, is of course that of poetic composition, or the creations of hymns of praise and prayer, a function which connects the *ṛṣi* to *vāc*, the Divine Word (cf. Benedetti 2004, pp. 44–45). Later, as a result of the growing prestige arising from their connection with the Divine Word, a further function would be assigned to the *ṛṣis*; this is first mentioned in a late *ṛgvedic* hymn (*ṚS* 10.82.4) dedicated to Viśvakarman, where the *ṛṣis* are depicted as creators of beings:

*ṛṣayaḥ pūrve ... ye bhūtāni samakṛṇvann imāni* –  
“The first *ṛṣis* ... who moulded these beings ...”

They also take part in the sacrifice of the primordial *Puruṣa*, the act of inauguration of the cosmos (*ṚS* 10.90.7):

*taṁ yajñam barhiṣi praukṣan puruṣam jātamagrataḥ | tena devā ayajanta sādhyā ṛṣayaś ca ye* –  
“That *Puruṣa*, born in the beginning of time, they [the gods] sprinkled as a sacrificial victim on the litter of grass. Through him the gods, the *Sādhyas* and the *ṛṣis* accomplished the sacrifice.”

<sup>1</sup> I wish to express my gratitude to Giuliano Boccali, Natalia Lidova, Carmela Mastrangelo, Cinzia Pieruccini, Karin Preisendanz, Chettiarthodi Rajendran for their valuable hints.

So a secondary, cosmogonical function is attributed to the *ṛṣis*. In the AS this function becomes central: here the *ṛṣis* are several times described as *bhūtakṛt*, “creators of beings”; see, for example, AS 6.108.4 (see also AS 11.1.1, 3, 24; 12.1.39; cf. Benedetti 2004, pp. 48 ff.):

*yām ṛṣayo bhūtakṛto medhām medhāvino viduḥ | tayā mām adya medhayāgne medhāvinam  
kṛnu –*

“Now make me wise, o Agni, through the wisdom which the wise *ṛṣis*, creators of beings, know.”

According to the later Vedic tradition, the Universe exists precisely because the *ṛṣis* have desired it and worked on their desire to the point of exhaustion; the etymology of *ṛṣi* is traced to that of the verb “to exhaust oneself” (ŚB 6.1.1.1):

*te yat purāsmāt sarvasmād idam icchantāḥ śrameṇa tapasārīṣaṇis tasmād ṛṣayaḥ –*  
“Before the Universe existed, they desired it, they exhausted themselves (*ṛiṣ-*) with work and ascetic fervour: and for this reason they are called *ṛṣis*.”

Aklujkar (2001, p. 457) affirms that in the context of the Vedic tradition “... the sounds uttered by certain individuals, commonly called *ṛṣis* or seers, ... are said to have a genetic relationship with things”.

If we look at the post-Vedic tradition, the situation does not change much. In the MS (1.34–36) the ten *maharṣis*, or great sages, are represented as the first creatures emitted by the demiurge; they in turn emit the seven Manus, the gods and the other sages, every kind of being and all natural phenomena; the whole known universe descends therefore from the *maharṣis*. In the Epics and Purāṇas the seven *ṛṣis* are collectively known as the Prajāpatis (although a single *ṛṣi* can be referred to as a Prajāpati as well). In short, they are creators and sustainers of the three worlds (Mitchiner 1982, p. 298).

The AS (19.41) attributes another important function to the *ṛṣis*; they are the founders of royal power:

*bhadrām icchanta ṛṣayaḥ svarvidas tapo dikṣām upaniṣedur agre | tato rāṣṭraṃ balam ojas  
ca jātam tad asmai devā upasaṃnamantu –*

“In pursuit of prosperity, the celestial *ṛṣis* were first drawn to asceticism and consecration; from here regality was born, and power, and strength. Therefore the gods should bow down before him [the king].”

It is not the Vedic bard who must put himself under the protection of the sovereign, as one might think; rather, regality itself derives from the power of the *ṛṣis*. Another hymn of the RS (3.39.1; trans. Sani 2000, p. 86) had already explicitly connected poetic thought to the prototype sovereign, Indra:

*indram matir hṛdā ā vacyamānācchā patiṇi stomataṣṭā jigāti –*

“Taking impetus from the heart, and assuming the form of a hymn, poetic thought (*matī*) draws close to Indra as to her bridegroom.”

As we have seen, the *ṛṣis* are, in some ways, superior to the gods. However, the real cosmopoietic power is held by the Word: the *ṛṣis* possess this power in proportion to their manifestation of the Word. The Vedic passages that attest the faculty of the Word to create and order the world are numerous. Think, for example, of the famous rgvedic hymn in which the Word describes itself (RS 10.125.3, 7):

*tām mā devā vyadadhuḥ purutrā bhūristhātṛāṃ bhūryāveśayantim –*

“The gods have scattered me into many places; I am she who has many abodes and assumes many forms;”

*ahaṃ suve pītaram asya mūrdhan –*

“It is I who generate the father at the summit of this world.”<sup>2</sup>

Think also of the many affirmations we find in the Brāhmaṇas like the following (TB 2.8.8.4–5):

*vāg akṣaram prathamajāḥ ṛtasya | vedānām mātāmṛtasya nābhīḥ –*

“The Word is the indefectible/syllable, the first-born of *Ṛta*, the mother of the Vedas, the centre of immortality.”

And again:

*vācam devā upajīvanti viśve | vācam gandharvāḥ paśavo manuṣyāḥ | vāci imā viśvā  
bhuvanāny arpitā –*

“All the gods are sustained by the Word; and all celestial musicians, all animals and men; all these worlds are established in the Word.”

<sup>2</sup> The “father” is presumably the divinity who in his turn created the world (cf. Sani 2000, p. 260 note 194).

According to some texts, in the beginning Prajāpati, the creator god, is alone; he is filled with the desire to procreate, that is to multiply. The god already contained within himself the Word, and his first gesture was to bring her forth: she becomes his second self and he couples with her. There are two possible outcomes: the Word, which is gravid, draws away from Prajāpati, gives birth to the creatures and then re-enters him; or the coupling comes about between the *manas* of Prajāpati and the Word, and it is Prajāpati who becomes gravid (ŚB 6.1.2.6; cf. Malamoud 2005, p. 114). This creator god has, in any case, the Word as his characteristic companion.

According to the RS (1.164.39) the gods reside in the supreme firmament, understood as the syllable/indissoluble of the strophe (*ṛco akṣare paramē vyomany asmin devā adhi viśve niṣeduh*). But while the gods are the product of the carrying out of sacrifice, and depend on this at every moment (ŚB 4.5.7.3), the Vedic Word depends on nothing, nor was it created; although it was revealed, it certainly did not begin with that revelation, nor has it any kind of beginning. On the other hand, the Indian concept of the absolute represents the continuation of the idea of the power of the Vedic Word: both concepts are in fact expressed in the word *brahman* (cf. Malamoud 1989, p. 278–9).

It is fundamental to note that the structure of the Word and that of the primordial Puruṣa are parallel: the Word is made up of three parts inaccessible to man, and a fourth which is the human word (RS 1.164.45); likewise “three parts of Puruṣa were raised on high; the fourth part of him was transformed into beings” (RS 10.90.4). The primordial man repeats, then, the Word.<sup>3</sup>

Already in the RS we find a connection between the terms *ṛṣi* and *kavi*. *Kavi* in the sense of “sage”, “clairvoyant”, is frequently used as an epithet for *ṛṣi*. *Kavi* is connected with the Indo-European root *\*keuH-*. From this is derived an Indo-Aryan form *\*kauH-*, *seṭ* root, which in Sanskrit in the reduced grade is represented by the stem *kū-*. The most ancient meaning must have been, generically, “to see”.<sup>4</sup> Later there was created a series

<sup>3</sup> The same structure is repeated in relation to the sacrificial fire and the bride (cf. Malamoud 1989, p. 147).

<sup>4</sup> Werba (1997, p. 276) renders the meaning with “(be)merken, sehen”; Whitney (1963, p. 20) with “design”.

on the stem *ku-*, a secondary *aniṭ* formation. The root *kū-/ku-* (class 2 P. *kauti*, intensive *kokūyate*) has assumed in classical Sanskrit the meaning of “to cry”, by virtue of a process of semantic redetermination, probably due to onomatopoeic suggestion and the assonance with such roots as *gu-*, or *kūj-*, “to (re-) sound”.<sup>5</sup> The word *kavi* thus implies both a reference to the capacity peculiar to the *ṛṣi* of contemplating the Veda, and a reference to his quality as a sonic source, that is a source of inspired strophes.

The original lexical and semantic association between the terms *ṛṣi* and *kavi* is a prelude to the creation of the figure of the *kavi* of the classical era as the ideal prosecution of the figure of the *ṛṣi*. The *kavis* absorbed certain characteristics of the *ṛṣis*, in particular their cosmopoietic function. This process is parallel and closely linked to the process of absorption into Sanskrit of the ontological status of the Veda (cf. Aklujkar 1996, p. 72). Just as the characteristics and functions of the Veda flow into Sanskrit, in the same way the *kavi* will receive the prerogatives of the *ṛṣi*. Certainly, the aspect of the passage of the functions of the *ṛṣi* to the *kavi* is not immediately obvious. What strikes the eye is rather the clear distinction between the Vedic tradition and *kāvya*, especially as regards their content and stylistic elements.<sup>6</sup> However, the discontinuity of content is due to the fact that even if the *kavi* formally assumes the functions of the *ṛṣi*, the contents of his poetizing must be completely different: it is no longer the cosmos of the *brāhmaṇas*, it is now the cosmos of the kings. Nevertheless, the *kavi* is the true heir of the *ṛṣi*. Consider first of all how the central

<sup>5</sup> In Greek the root is represented by *κωκύω*, “I wail”, whence *Κωκυτός*, *Kokyotos*, “the river of wailing”, on which onomatopoeic terms such as *κόκκυξ* (lat. *coccyx*), cuckoo, *κοκκύω*, “to cry”, must have had an influence.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Boccali 2000, p. 406. In spite of appearances, there are many elements of continuity between the Veda and *kāvya*. Consider, for example, how, among the subcategories of *kāvya*, theatre was of particular importance, since it contributed notably to the genesis of *kāvya* itself. And “the connection of kings with drama was greater than with poetry” (Smith 1985, p. 88). Now, as Malamoud (2005, p. 11) rightly notes, classical theatre has a kind of antecedent in the Veda: the Vedic language already had what we could call a theatrical use, and the scene of the sacrifice was in a certain sense a theatrical scene. Furthermore, among the most striking resemblances between *kāvya* and the Vedic *saṃhitās* one should count a deliberate pursuit of obscurity, for example through the figure of speech known as *śleṣa* (cf. Smith 1985, pp. 96–98).

faculty of both has to do, unexpectedly, with sight rather than with hearing or speech. The *ṛṣi* observes the Veda rather than listening to it: *Nir.* 2.11 traces the derivation of the word *ṛṣi* to the root *drś-*, “to see”. That is as much as to say that the Veda is pure essence, or structure, and that as such it is timeless. The Veda, or a part of it, is captured in a momentary glance. The sequential nature of the words serves only to reveal the Veda to an ordinary listener, that is the non-*ṛṣi*. Now, the world manifested by the *kavi*, too, is presented as being essential and timeless. It is basically a world of abstraction and myth, as is shown by the fact that “all the images employed in *kāvya* are strikingly stereotyped” (Smith 1985, p. 80). An essential prerogative of the *kavi* is precisely *pratibhā*, or *pratibhāna*, intuition and at the same time poetic inspiration (cf. Gonda 1963, p. 318). This word implies a visual element, since the root *bhā-* refers to light. *Pratibhā* means not only “intuition” or “inspiration”. Even before these meanings, it carries the sense of “coming to the sight”, “revealing oneself”. It would not be wrong to affirm that the “intuition” of the poets consists, at least in part, in the “self-revelation” of things. Note how for Sureśvara, *pratibhā* is “*ārṣa*”, that is, directly traceable to the *ṛṣis* (*Vārttika* on *Taitt.* Up. 9, st. 160, cit. in Gonda 1963, p. 325). In fact, according to many Indian authors *pratibhā* is inborn (*naisargika*) (cf. Lienhard 1979, p. 311). Since it is certainly not anything that can have to do with the romantic spirit (a concept evidently quite foreign to pre-colonial India), it is clear that its model can only be the clairvoyance (*dhī*) of the *ṛṣis*. According to Bhaṭṭa Tauta, in the poet description (*varṇana*) is preceded by vision (*darśana*) (cf. Ray 2008, p. 53). Moreover, he maintains (cit. in KA, p. 379; cf. Sreekantaiya 2001, p. 141):

*nāṇṛṣiḥ kavir ity uktam ṛṣiś ca kila darśanāt –*

“A non-*ṛṣi* cannot be a poet; and, indeed, one is a poet because of his vision.”

The coincidences and analogies between the figure of the *ṛṣi* and that of the *kavi* are witnesses to the fact that the latter was modelled intentionally on the former, so that he could fulfil certain determined projects of a socio-political nature such as the re-establishment of royal power (and we have previously mentioned how the king derived his power from the *ṛṣi*), the elaboration of a model of universal lordship and the universalization

of a cultured community.<sup>7</sup> The need for universalization was first felt by sovereigns of foreign origin during the centuries around the beginning of the Christian era, such as the Śaka and Kuṣāna monarchs, who attempted to govern over and beyond local divisions which saw them as foreign from the start (cf. Lo Turco 2009). As Smith (1985, p. 72) puts it: “By *kāvya* new monarchs, lacking hereditary history and hereditary bards, were given instant credentials, at one and the same time vague and universal.”

An unfavourable lack of rootedness was changed into a positive pursuit of universalization. The latter gave rise to the idea of using Sanskrit, by now seen as being totally without any geographical connotations, as the court language. The impetus towards universalization would soon be adopted by sovereigns of non-foreign origin, too, culminating in the splendours of the Gupta epoch.

It was a question, therefore, of creating ex novo or almost so a universe of shared references. Smith (1985, p. 73) maintains that “the poet fostered and strengthened a whole new world of his imagining, in which the king could be included”. This creation could come about precisely through the cosmopoietic function, characteristic of the bearers of the Divine Word. There is an ideal continuity between those who, in different epochs, manifested the Sanskrit language at the highest possible level of excellence, namely the *ṛṣis* and the *kavis*. The *kavis* are thus the real heirs of the *ṛṣis*, from whom they inherited the cosmopoietic function, both its vehicle, the Sanskrit language, and its relation with royal power. The use of Sanskrit as court poetic language was probably the fruit of the influence of a belief commonly held by the Vedic Brahmins on the court elite (without in any way implying the Brahmins’ approval of this):<sup>8</sup> the implicit belief in the cosmopoietic power of Sanskrit, which led to an ideal transfer of functions from the *ṛṣi* to the *kavi*.

<sup>7</sup> According to Smith (1985, p. 56): “... *kāvya* is in some sense an updating of the Vedas, and, possibly, an attempt to displace their authority.”

<sup>8</sup> Despite this handing over of cosmopoietic power from the *ṛṣi* to the *kavi*, the fact that there were still living representatives of the Vedic culture inside the court, namely the Vaidika Brahmins, must have brought about a conflict between newcomers and conservatives. In fact *kāvya* “was almost a counter-culture, a rival to the Vedas” (Smith 1985, p. 96).

As a matter of fact, the *kavi* creates a new cosmos. "Just as god creates the universe, so does the poet create a new world" (Smith 1985, p. 89) and he does it, among other things, by a minute description of Nature, a Nature which is seen to be completely different from that of the Vedic tradition. In fact, *kāvya* has almost no precedents as far as its contents are concerned. Mammaṭa states clearly that "the poet's speech" (*bhāratī kaveḥ*) produces "a creation which is free from the constraint of Nature's law" (*niyatikṛtanyamarahita*), "totally independent" (*ananyaparatantra*) (KP 1.1; cf. Smith 1985, p. 89). Moreover, he affirms (KP 1.3):

*apāre kāvyasaṁsāre kavir ekaḥ prajāpatiḥ | yathāśmai rocate viśvam tathedam parivartate –*  
 "In the boundless universe of poetry the poet is the only creator; this whole world changes as he likes it."

The creative function of *kāvya* is also outlined at the beginning of the RV (1.1):

*vāgarthāu iva saṁprktau vāgarthapratipattaye | jagataḥ pitarau vande pārvatīparamēśvarau –*  
 "Pārvatī and Śiva be praised, parents of the world, melted together as word and sense, so that I can master word and sense."

Boccali (2008, pp. 193–194) rightly explains that "'word' and 'sense', significant for poetry, create the (poetic) universe as the divine couple the world". Nevertheless, as is natural, the sovereign and the kingdom are represented as actualizations of mythical models. Thus, while the cosmopoietic function is explicitly attributed to the *ṛṣi*, to the *kavi* it is more generally attributed only implicitly; the *kavi* continues the creative activity of the *ṛṣi*, but this is not often explicitly affirmed – a kind of repression is at work – since the royal ideology implies that the sovereign is presented as an earthly repetition of the divinity (and the insistence on "repetition" would impede, logically, any exercise of creativity). As is stated in the RV (2.50cd), among the infinite number of possible examples,

*mahitalasparśanamātrabhinnaṁ rddham ... rājyam padam aindram āhuh –*  
 "... a prosperous kingdom is said to be the abode of Indra, distinguished simply by its touching the surface of the earth."

It is a question, therefore, of mythical models which, while being presented as ancient or timeless, are in reality, at the time of the appearance of *kāvya*, in the phase of definition through the work of *kāvya* itself. In other words, *kāvya* tends to spread a patina of timelessness over what is in fact new. Around the same period the purāṇic cosmos, too, which is of course not without points in common with the cosmos of *kāvya*, is in a definition phase: the *purāṇas* are compiled, elaborated, re-compiled and periodically enlarged thanks to royal patronage. And in the same period the *pūja* takes the place of the *yajña*. Interestingly, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is the first text to describe the rituality of the *pūja* kind in detail; in a sense, aesthetic theory rises together with the description of the *pūja* (cf. Lidova 1994, pp. 42–52, 108–118).

The epigraphic panegyric (*praśasti*), closely connected with the origins of the Sanskrit *kāvya*, functions, at least initially, as a model for the whole *kāvya* movement. Every *praśasti* is in fact addressed to the same archetypal figure, that of the universal sovereign and his lineage. And "panegyric is parallel to [Vedic] ritual;" "ritual usually explicitly, panegyric usually implicitly, both desire to strengthen the king" (Smith 1985, p. 79). The king is legitimate because the panegyric demonstrates that he repeats and renders tangible the model of the universal sovereign who protects the *dharma* (cf. Brocquet 2004–2005, p. 75). The whole *kāvya* shares a great implicit narrative. As Boccali (2000, p. 390) affirms: "The themes and motifs of the classical works belong, so to speak, to a traditional constituted patrimony, one might even say to a repertoire, the reader's familiarity with which is assumed." *Kāvya* is always the result of the actualization of traits which, as they become explicit, refer to an implicit ideal world. In effect, the ability of the *kavi* lies also in his capacity to elevate references to the historical context of the kingdom from their original level of contingency, which was placed in parenthesis, to a mythical level, without rendering them so undefined as not to be caught and appreciated as allusions to the present. The neutralization of the contingency projected the sovereign, the court and the whole kingdom into the timeless world of myth. At the same time, this projection gave life to a particular myth, which in this way became almost tangible. In fact, the usefulness of the activity of the *kavi* consisted in conferring on the sovereign and his court a prestige that was almost



absolute. Naturally this tendency is common to many places and times in the history of mankind. Nevertheless, the characteristic quality of the Sanskrit *kāvya* is that the referral to a transcendent plane is not just an attribute of the discourse, but also of the language itself.

The timelessness of *kāvya* is often pinpointed more or less explicitly by those Indian thinkers who dealt with literary theory. Take for example Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka (tenth century): he maintains that it is not true that the arousing of the aesthetic feeling, the *rasa*, is determined by causes and conditions, such as the various kinds of emotion represented on the stage, or by the words of the poet (ABh 1, ed. and trans. Gnoli 1968, pp. 10, 43):

*raso na pratiyate, notpadyate, nābhivyajyate* –  
“*Rasa* is not perceived, nor produced, nor manifested.”

This type of causality belongs to the everyday world, what we would call the historically determined world. Rather, for Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka, the poetic word or the action of the drama has a special power, which goes beyond the simple power of denotation; in fact they engender *bhāvanā*, contemplation. This has the capacity to universalize the emotion represented and to cause the empirical ego to vanish, at least temporarily. Aesthetic contemplation is independent of the empirical characterization of everyday experience, whether that of the spectator or that of the actor or personage (cf. Gnoli 1968, pp. XXI-XXII; 10–12; 43–51). So here the act of removal from historical context which belongs to *kāvya* is implicitly recognised. In the context of literary theory, therefore, we can clearly read the social function of *kāvya*, which is linked to the needs of an empire. This removal from his historical context projects the historical king, who is often alluded to in the dramas, and his court, into a timeless dimension, in which, naturally, decadence, struggle, doubt, conspiracy, revolt, and dynastic claims do not exist, and from which the king may legitimately aspire to universal sovereignty.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Not for nothing has one the impression that “*kāvya* sought to engender serenity” (Smith 1985, p. 67).

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## Landscape